



Dredging is a Drain on the Lakes, Study Says

By Dan Egan, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Nov. 1--Great Lakes governors, famous for hoarding almost every drop of the world's largest freshwater system, are pushing for a tighter water-diversion law they hope will serve as a deadbolt when thirsty outsiders start banging on the door.

Perhaps they should pull their eyes off the peephole and take a look behind them to see what might already be going down their own drain.

An engineering study funded by a group of Canadian lakefront property owners this year claims a 1962 Army Corps of Engineers dredging project, done in conjunction with St. Lawrence Seaway construction, essentially pulled the plug on Lakes Michigan and Huron, sending an average of nearly 1 billion gallons a day out to sea.

The corps is taking the study seriously, though it isn't willing to concede that its dredging project to allow oceangoing ships to use the St. Clair River has done the damage the property owners claim. The St. Clair River is part of the waterway that links Lake Huron to Lake Erie.

"There is something going on in the system that definitely needs to be looked at," Scott Thieme, chief of the corps' Great Lakes office for hydraulics and hydrology, told a group of Lake Michigan sport and commercial fishermen at a meeting in Manitowoc County this summer.

The homeowners' study, conducted by the respected firm of Baird & Associates Coastal Engineers, claims that the dredging project, combined with earlier dredging and riverbed sand-mining operations in the late 1800s, has led to a total drop of about 30 inches in the long-term average levels of Lakes Huron and Michigan -- an amount of water equal to about one-quarter the volume of Lake Erie.

At the time of the '62 dredging, the corps predicted a drop of about 16 inches, but the Baird study claims that a faster flowing St. Clair River has led to ongoing erosion on the river bottom, and the loss of about another foot of water.

"That is not something that should happen," says Rob Nairn, author of the study, who likens the situation to an ever-growing drain at the bottom of a bathtub. "We've got something alarming going on here."

The homeowners who funded the \$200,000 Baird study are eager to see the issue studied further, and Michigan Congresswoman Candice Miller is seeking \$2.5 million to do further studies to figure out exactly what is going on.

If the Baird findings do hold up, possible solutions to the problem include dumping rocks in the eroding portions of the river channel. But Thieme said that likely will require extensive studies.

"It would take, I would assume, quite a few years to actually get something like that in place," he says.

The situation has caught the attention of people who live outside the Great Lakes basin but are eyeing Great Lakes water.

The City of Waukesha, for example, desperately needs to find a new source of drinking water for its 70,000 residents. Like several other southeastern Wisconsin communities, its wells are plagued with high levels of potentially cancer-causing radium.

Lake Michigan would be an obvious answer for a community that consumes about 7 million gallons per day, but the city lies just beyond the Great Lakes basin.

And as the law currently works, communities outside the basin are prohibited from taking Great Lakes water unless they get unanimous approval from all eight Great Lakes governors, something that rarely happens.

The governors are reworking those laws and could approve a new rule that would allow communities to tap the Great Lakes, provided they ship their treated wastewater back. Because of the expense involved in moving water, the idea is that the new law would make it prohibitively expensive for far-away communities to access the lakes.

But that law could still be years away.

Waukesha and its neighbors have a problem right now.

And right now the Baird study claims the lakes are losing an average of about 845 million gallons a day.

"It puts things in perspective," says Waukesha water utility general manager Dan Duchniak. "We're talking about a public health issue."

To see more of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.jsonline.com>.

Copyright (c) 2005, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News.

For information on republishing this content, contact us at (800) 661-2511 (U.S.), (213) 237-4914 (worldwide), fax (213) 237-6515, or e-mail reprints@krtinfo.com.

Story from REDNOVA NEWS:
<http://www.rednova.com/news/display/?id=292002>

Published: 2005/11/01 21:00:36 CST

© Rednova 2004